

HEMP-GRADING SERVICE.

REPORT OF THE CHIEF HEMP GRADER.

The Director-General.

Wellington, 14th April, 1919.

ATTACHED please find annual report for the year ended 31st March, 1919.

W. H. FERRIS, Chief Hemp Grader.

Although the quantities of hemp and tow received for the year show a fairly large decrease compared with the previous year (when record prices were ruling), the output and the prices obtained must be regarded as satisfactory. The recent epidemic (during the months of November and December) was responsible for a decrease of at least 9,000 bales. The closing-down of the Opuhi mill of four strippers (owing to diseased leaf in the swamps) helped materially to decrease the Foxton returns. Congestion in the grading-stores at Auckland and Bluff, owing to the shortage of shipping during the year, compelled the merchants to discontinue buying, with the result that many of the smaller mills had to cease operations.

The average prices obtained for our fibre are as follows: Hemp—Good-fair £42, high-fair £40, low-fair £38, and common £30 per ton respectively; tow—First grade £7, second grade £6, third grade £5 per ton. The total value of the hemp, tow, and stripper-slips produced in the Dominion for the year was approximately £1,062,465.

Notwithstanding that high values ruled, the quality of most of the hemp graded in the Dominion during the year was of a disappointing character. Especially is the position unsatisfactory when it is remembered that the milling plant has been greatly improved during the last few years, thereby making it possible to produce a much freer and better-coloured fibre. The principal cause of the decline in quality is, in my opinion, poor stripping, due either to a desire to strip more fibre than the stripper is capable of treating effectively, to careless work on the part of the stripper-keeper, or to the employment of inexperienced men. In many cases the phormium-leaf has been merely split owing to the stripper not being maintained at the correct set. For the same reason much of the hemp has been bruised and thereby reduced in strength. The stripping being bad, after-processes have failed to correct the weakness. Where the vegetable-matter has not been properly removed from the fibre no system of washing or bleaching will ensure a good colour. In numerous cases where the stripping had been satisfactory the fibre had to be graded down owing to the poor scutching, and bad scutching is often more serious from the cordage-manufacturer's point of view than poor stripping. The latter may leave considerable vegetable-matter adhering to the fibre, and may cause it to have a poor colour, but the fibre will not be knotted or towy. Of course, it is impossible to properly scutch fibre bruised in the stripping process, as the more such fibre is scutched the worse its condition becomes.

It is not forgotten that some mills have very poor leaf to deal with—leaf from which nothing but a low grade of fibre can be produced—but these mills are excluded from the above remarks. Some of the largest and best mills in the Dominion, having a good leaf to deal with, are turning out unsatisfactory fibre. During the past few seasons the percentage of low-grade fibre has been very high, which is without doubt due to the high prices ruling, as well as the unsatisfactory milling-work.

Previous to the present boom the general standard of our fibre was very good. Certainly only the best mills were working at the lower values, but these were intent on aiming at quality rather than quantity. Now, as in the previous boom-time, the position is reversed, and everything is apparently being sacrificed to quantity. More money may be made by a heavy output of low-grade fibre which can be sold at a high price, but it is doubtful if it is more profitable even now than milling a superior article, and it is certainly against a permanent demand for phormium, the reputation of which is being imperilled by the present short-sighted policy. There is a good demand for good-fair fibre, but very little of this quality is available, a matter for great regret, as good-fair has been our standard quality for binder-twine. If this grade is not obtainable cordage-manufacturers will be compelled to use other fibres for this purpose to our disadvantage. Australian binder-twine manufacturers prefer our good-fair to manila, but as the former is not available they are being forced to use manila.

A very bad feature of some lines coming forward is that, evidently with the idea of utilizing every scrap of fibre, some of the hanks are "faced" with good fibre, giving the hank the appearance of being of decent quality, but when the hank is opened for inspection it is found to contain hemp of a very inferior quality. To millers who make it a practice of "facing" their hemp no consideration is shown by the graders, the hemp being severely graded down. The only district that turned out a good quality of fibre during the past season was the Marlborough District, practically the whole output being either fine or good-fair; the percentage of good-fair at the chief grading-ports was very disappointing.

The quality of tow for the past season, especially at the ports of Wellington, Foxton, and Picton, was exceptionally good, chiefly on account of the automatic scutchers and tow-shakers used. The quality at the ports of Auckland and Bluff is still very inferior, the proportion of first grade at Auckland having been only 2 per cent., and at Bluff nil. The large decrease in stripper-slips is due to the low prices offering for this by-product and shortage of shipping.